

Last Fresno resident of prominent pioneer family remembered for generosity, support of classical music

By Carmen George

William David "Dave" Phillips as an infant being held by his grandfather, William Walker, Phillips about 1927-28.

PHILLIPS FAMILY — SPECIAL TO THE BEE

- William David "Dave" Phillips

Age: 87

Residence: Fresno

Born: Nov. 13, 1927

Died: March 25, 2015

Occupation: Retired insurance agent and philanthropist

Surviving family: Son John Phillips, daughters Jane Phillips Fortino and Margaret (Phillips) Wessel, and four granddaughters.

Services: A private graveside service will be held at 10:30 a.m. April 6 followed by a reception at the home of Robert Boro, 666 E. Home Ave. in central Fresno.



The last Fresno resident of a prominent pioneer family has died, leaving behind a legacy of support for classical music in Fresno and ties to historic ranches.

William David "Dave" Phillips, who retired as a Fresno insurance agent, died March 25 after a battle with emphysema. He was 87.

Mr. Phillips' roots in Fresno and Madera counties go back almost 150 years. In the late 1800s, his grandfather purchased "Riverview Ranch" — now part of the San Joaquin River Parkway northeast of Fresno. The original ranch house on the 360-plus-acre dairy ranch with fruit trees has been renovated and now serves as the Coke Hallowell Center for River Studies.

The Phillipses are also cousins to the Dixon and Mordecai families, who operate the large "Refuge" ranch in Madera County. George Mordecai, a former state Assembly member, is considered a founding father of Madera County.

The Phillipses were some of Fresno's earliest and most fervent supporters of music and art — a tradition Mr. Phillips would continue. He created two Fresno State scholarships for piano performance: one in honor of his mother, a former president of the Fresno Musical Club; the other for his late wife, a proficient pianist.

Mr. Phillips and his sister also created an arts endowment, the William David and Mary Walker Phillips Foundation, which was rolled into the Fresno Regional Foundation and the scholarships Mr. Phillips established.

“He was one of the kindest and most generous men I ever met,” said lifelong friend Robert Boro, 65, who served on the board of Mr. Phillips’ foundation. “He was absolutely devoted to his family and his children.”

The family has a long lineage of musicians. Mr. Phillips’ great-grandmother, according to one history book, helped raise money to build Fresno’s first church — the Methodist Episcopal Church South once located downtown at Fresno and L streets — by hosting fundraiser concerts. She also played the organ at the groundbreaking of Fresno’s first courthouse.

Mr. Phillips’ sister, Mary, was world-renowned for knitting, weaving and macrame, a form of textile-making using knotting. She was interviewed by Barbara Walters and featured in the first edition of the Smithsonian Magazine. Her textiles are preserved in a number of museums across the country. When Mary died in Fresno at age 83, her life and work were chronicled in obituaries written by The New York Times and the Los Angeles Times.

Mr. Phillips grew up in central Fresno near Fresno High School, where he attended school. His father was a minority partner in Federal Fruit Distributors — a perk that sometimes earned the young man a ride on the locomotive steam engine that barreled into town to haul away boxed fruit.

Mr. Phillips’ lifelong friend Richard Samuelian, 87, recalled their happy childhood together, watching car races through dusty fields west of their homes and entertaining themselves with simple games. “Pile up” was a favorite, where neighborhood boys vied for the opportunity to lay at the bottom of a vast pile of children to prove their strength.

In later years, Mr. Phillips and Samuelian spent a lot of time at family cabins on Huntington Lake, where they enjoyed sailing and fishing.

“He loved to joke around and needle and tease,” Samuelian recalled of his friend. “He and I had an ongoing sparring match — about our lack of hair, for one.”

Seeing his friend’s boat approaching on Huntington Lake, Mr. Phillips would call out across the water, “Hey, put a cap on! The glare is so bad I can’t see where I’m going!”

Mr. Phillips attended Menlo College and graduated from Stanford University, majoring in economics. After graduating, he worked for Trans World Airlines and later, New England Life Insurance Company in Fresno. Mr. Phillips also served in the Army during the Korean War.

Son John Phillips of New York recalled his father’s exceptional generosity supporting a number of Fresno groups and people. One of John’s earliest memories is watching his dad buy loads of groceries and packing them into the car of a family in need.

“That was no rare occurrence,” he said.

“My family was not wealthy, but they valued the Fresno community an awful lot.”

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